

Saving Shakespeare

by Jan H. Blits

How should one read Shakespeare? How should a reader approach a Shakespeare play to find the meaning that Shakespeare put into it? This is not a schoolmarmish question. Forced on us by the considerable political and cultural bias that looms so large today, the question should interest everyone who wishes to comprehend and enjoy Shakespeare's works as he intended them to be understood. The main step, we'll see, is to begin by giving full weight to Shakespeare's deliberate dramatic settings.

Kill the Author

The most glaring obstacle to a receptive reading are the many postmodern theories pervading the literary world today. Ranging from deliberate parody and pastiche to political subversion, they stem from the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and others, and include Deconstructionism, Postcolonialism, Structuralism, New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, Critical Theory, Marxist Theory, Queer Theory, Gender Theory, and numerous identity or cultural studies. Although

differing among themselves in other respects, postmodern theories triumphantly claim to have done away with the authority of the author—"The author is dead," as Roland Barthes declares—and to have replaced the author's authority with that of the reader (and postmodernism itself). Since these theorizers presume that no word or text has a stable meaning and therefore no author can determine what his or her writing really means, they call upon readers to impose their favorite theory-based meanings onto the text rather than allow the text to disclose the author's meaning to them. The traditional precedence of author and text is radically overturned. A Shakespeare play (or any work of literature, for that matter) is treated as nothing more than a void to be filled by the reader's preferred postmodern theoretical construct. In this view, there is no reason to seek Shakespeare's intended meaning, for there is none.

Theatergoers of recent years will easily recognize this. Shakespeare performances routinely transmogrify their material, aiming to demonstrate their deviation from—and superiority to—

Shakespeare himself. Not surprisingly, these bastard productions are stereotypically woke. To take one of the many examples, at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, New York, in 2021, director Kenny Leon set *Hamlet* in Atlanta, Georgia, amid the political tumult following the 2020 presidential election. To infuse a racial dynamic into the story, he cast Hamlet's family as black and Ophelia's as white or mixed-race, and placed a torn and tattered "Stacy Abrams for President" campaign banner askew on stage as if it were discarded trash and an American flag hanging from a pole inclined to the ground as if signaling distress.

While stage productions frequently omit relatively minor parts of this very long play, Leon truncated key speeches and cut out whatever lines, scenes, and characters didn't fit his racial Atlanta story. The omissions included both the opening scene when Horatio and the Sentinels encounter the Ghost and the Fortinbras ending when the rule of Denmark passes to Norway, as well as all political matters, large and small, foreign and domestic. Leon also reordered some scenes and invented others and turned the play into a semi-musical by suffusing it with hip-hop. Emphasizing present political and cultural relevance, Tony award-winner Leon won critical praise but made Shakespeare's *Hamlet* incomprehensible to his audience.

Historicist Editors

While postmodernism is the most flagrant, it is not the only or the most

pervasive editorial hinderance to appreciating Shakespeare. What generally passes today for a traditional approach—the sort that postmodernism principally targets—also impedes the reader's grasp. Its effect goes unnoticed, though, because it is so familiar. Like postmodernism, this commonplace approach is the product of theorizing. And, also like postmodernism, it imposes cultural and historical displacements upon the plays, obscuring and even denying Shakespeare's intended meaning.

Such editors take for granted, without a moment's thought, that Shakespeare's interest and knowledge are limited to his contemporary England. Whether implicitly or explicitly, they are guided by Hegel's Historicist principle that an author, no matter how great, is confined to the time and place in which he lived. As T.S. Elliot famously sums up, referring specifically to Shakespeare, "The great poet ... writes his time." Thus Shakespeare, inescapably a captive of Elizabethan politics and culture, necessarily reflects the world *in* which he wrote, not the world *of* which he wrote. The latter is, in fact, merely a stand-in for the former. Shakespeare's dramatic settings are relegated to mere background and Elizabethan-Jacobean England is proclaimed the play's proper foreground. Foreigners become Englishmen in drag; foreign countries and cultures become English in all but name.

Imposing Elizabethan England upon foreign settings produces pervasive, often ludicrous, distortions, misdirection,

and sheer omissions on vital points, while at the same time exhibiting the editors' glaring ignorance. For instance, when Antony dies in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra laments, "The soldier's pole is fallen." Editors, unhelped by Roman history and culture, struggle to find a plausible meaning of the line. David Bevington, the New Cambridge editor, offering what he sees as one, says that Shakespeare was thinking of the festivities of a medieval or early modern village whose children dance around a high pole decked with flowers.

Far from being at all obscure, however, "The soldier's pole" clearly refers to Roman military ensigns or standards (*signa militaria*) which regulated every movement of every body of troops. As Shakespeare emphasizes in *Julius Caesar*, an ensign is at once a long pole, suspending a banner, with an eagle at the top, and the brave warrior who holds it and leads his cohort in battle. Originally devised by Romulus, the soldier's pole was sacrosanct and revered in Rome. Romans fought wars to recoup captured standards, as both the historical Antony and Augustus Caesar did.

Readers who credit Rome as the play's true setting would probably have little trouble recognizing Shakespeare's meaning and its implication. Antony's suicide marks the end of Roman manliness as the standard for virtue and as a way of life. The age of martial heroes is over. The gods who inspired Rome's martial way of life have lost their significance and strength. "[T]he god Hercules, whom Antony loved, / Now leaves

him," one of his soldiers observes. A world in which one man, Augustus Caesar, has become "[t]he universal landlord," "[s]ole sir o'th' world," has no need for gods who honor or support warlike action or earthly glory. A world of "universal peace" needs a universal god of peace—a god supporting the habits of humility, submission, and patience, not of pride, strength, and action. Bevington's blunder of confusing "The soldier's pole," the celebrated standard of Rome's martial activity, with a Maypole around which celebratory boys and girls dance, shows a serious, if risible, ignorance of the subject of the play that he claims to be annotating.

Even more far-fetched are historicist editors' explanations of *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare's depiction of the founding of the Roman Republic. In virtual unison, these editors insist that Coriolanus' Rome is Shakespeare's substitute for Elizabethan-Jacobean England. The politics depicted in the play, they contend, is not that of early Republican Rome, but of late sixteenth and early seventeenth century England. This strained transposition produces bizarre results. The two political issues central to *Coriolanus*—the plebeians' demand for corn at a reasonable price and the establishment of the office of tribunes—are central to Roman history. The political tumult surrounding them persisted for centuries. The Roman historian Livy, writing more than half a millennium after the events in *Coriolanus*, says that from that time to "this present hour [a land reform bill] was never debated" in

the Senate except “with exceeding great stirs and troubles of the state” (trans. Philemon Holland, 1600). Editors, nevertheless, typically uproot the conflict from its Roman context. Doing their utmost to place it in Elizabethan-Jacobean England, they maintain, as R.B. Parker, the New Cambridge editor, puts it, that “the emphasis on corn riots and the focus on Coriolanus’ struggle with the Tribunes reflect events in England during the first years of James I’s reign.” In particular, the Roman issues reflect, he argues, the 1607-08 Midland agrarian protests against the enclosure of formerly open-field farming land and the consequent food shortages. Lest readers doubt that Shakespeare would base a great tragedy on such parochial, ephemeral matters, Parker reports that Shakespeare was “a land speculator” in the Midlands who, as the Arden Shakespeare editor Peter Holland adds, bought “substantial holdings of land there in 1602, and, in 1605, the half-interest in tithes on the land ... that [William] Combe would later try to enclose.” Unable to see beyond their limited professional backyards, these editors confidently conclude that Shakespeare’s pecuniary interests explain his purported narrow parochialism.

DeRomanizing Shakespeare’s early Republican Rome seriously obscures or contorts *Coriolanus* on virtually all matters. Although Plutarch, Shakespeare’s principal source, calls Sicinius “the cruelest and stoutest of the Tribunes” (trans. Sir Thomas North, 1580). Parker, gentrifying him, says that “Shakespeare

sees him as one of the new middle class of London, the rich bourgeois and professional who supported Parliament’s struggle against James.” Parker turns a ruthless opportunist who, in his first act as Tribune, sought to throw Coriolanus to his death from the top of the Tarpeian Rock, into a middle class, fat cat Londoner.

Holland, going still further, distorts not just Shakespeare’s character Sicinius, but historical sequence itself. The tribunes, whose office was established in 494 BC, were the first plebeian officers in Western history to share political power with an aristocracy. Holland, however, describes certain London officials as the “historical predecessors” of Shakespeare’s tribunes. His reversal of two millennia of history underscores his indifference to Shakespeare’s portrayal of Rome. What matters to him, instead—what for him constitute “historical predecessors”—has nothing to do with Rome, but rather with what existed in London before Shakespeare wrote the characters into his play. Merely a surrogate for Shakespeare’s London, ancient Rome becomes irrelevant to Shakespeare’s Rome and drops out of *Coriolanus* in every important way. Editorial historicism drives out historical poetry.

Shakespeare scholars also often treat his characters as universal human types. Paradoxically, their historicism leads them to universalize the characters, precisely by Anglicizing them. To the scholars, as they presume is true for Shakespeare, England and the world

are one. Shakespeare's various foreign settings—Rome, Egypt, Venice, Athens, Denmark, Scotland, Tyre, Troy, Verona, Vienna, and elsewhere—are, in their view, mere patinas to give his dramas a bit of local color. When Shakespeare looks out at the world, they suppose, he sees only familiar England. Earlier times and distant places mean nothing to him. Shakespeare's universal is simply his parochial universalized.

Shakespeare's World

Shakespeare's dramatic world is a variety of different cultures, each of which he portrays in its own distinct terms. While human nature may be universal, ways of life are not. Societies everywhere may face the same fundamental human questions, but not all answer or deal with them alike. As Shakespeare shows, different cultures may worship different gods, have different social and political arrangements, love and hate different things, feel different pleasures and pains, emphasize different virtues and vices, encourage different ambitions, and, in general, pursue different ways of life. Different cultures shape us differently, bringing out or suppressing different aspects, possibilities, and problems of our shared nature. This human variety forms the core of Shakespeare's world. As the audience, we observe his plays from the outside, but Shakespeare, in effect going native, presents the drama to us from the inside. We see the characters as the characters see themselves.

Shakespeare's characters therefore are not interchangeable. Macbeth, for instance, refuses to "play the Roman fool and die / On [his] own sword." For the Romans, who cherish worldly glory more than life, suicide is a death-defying act. By killing himself, a Roman deprives his enemies of the honor of killing or capturing him, while showing his own courage in accepting death. Macbeth's Scotland, however, is a Christian monarchy, not a pagan timocracy. Suicide is a Christian sin. Eternal salvation, not worldly honor, is held to be the highest good. Thus, Macbeth, who is as much a manly warrior as the noblest Romans, and who, moreover, compares himself directly to Mark Antony, nevertheless looks down on suicide as Roman folly. And as he would not fit into Shakespeare's Rome, neither Antony nor any other Roman would fit into his Scotland. Pre-Christian Rome and medieval Scotland literally worship different gods.

Differences within Christianity, as well, distinguish Shakespeare's characters and dramas. *Macbeth*, for example, ends with the initial steps of Macbeth's Celtic Scotland's passing into Malcolm's Anglicized Scotland. Readers who ask—as many do—whether Shakespeare believes in the Witches that he portrays, pose the wrong question. The right question is why his characters do. The answer lies in Shakespeare's deliberate setting. *Macbeth* is set in a distinctly early medieval Christian cosmos. In general, Celtic Scots held that God not only sees but foresees everything, and

that God, moreover, does nothing that can be done through intermediaries. Thus the world in *Macbeth* is pervaded by a variety of preternatural beings able to prophesy and produce magical changes or effects in things. Nature is surrounded or suffused by the supernatural. Witches, angels, devils, spirits, and other such beings, bridging the gap between God and man, permeate the play. Furthermore, since medieval Scots generally believed that God orders all things and nothing can happen without God's active will, many characters in the play—notably, both the Macbeths and the Macduffs—believe that fortune or chance has little or no role in human affairs and that virtue—whether Christian or warrior—guarantees favorable outcomes of events. Malcolm, on the other hand, having been educated by King Edward of England, is the play's only major character free of Celtic superstitions and the only major character who appreciates the role of fortune or chance. Superstitions, as *Macbeth* vividly demonstrates, often reveal what distinguishes a culture and a way of life.

Shakespeare's Readers

Another professional prejudice hindering readers, also widely held and partly overlapping historicism, is the presumption that Shakespeare was indifferent to any implication that his theater audience would not immediately grasp. “[S]ince the text ... is silent, speculation is invalid,” the Arden *Hamlet* editor Harold Jenkins warns. This narrow reading strips *Hamlet*, perhaps

Shakespeare's most philosophical play, of its rich content.

Hamlet takes place in the early sixteenth century—a time of intellectual rebirth and religious reformation in Denmark. As we see throughout the play, Denmark is marked by the ongoing rediscovery of classical or neoclassical learning and by the rising reformation of the Christian doctrine of salvation. While at least five characters are said to have attended college, Shakespeare mentions four times (within just 55 lines) that Hamlet and Horatio have been studying at Wittenberg. Wittenberg University was famous for teaching humanism (Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus and Philipp Melanchthon taught there) and Luther's new doctrine of salvation (Luther lectured there for some 30 years and posted his 95 theses in Wittenberg in 1517).

Notwithstanding Shakespeare's emphasis, editors, at most, note only in passing that Hamlet and Horatio have been studying there. They make no effort to relate Hamlet's and Horatio's studies there to anything significant about either of them. They not only trivialize Hamlet's reference to the Diet of Worms, the Imperial Council that banned Luther for refusing to repudiate his reformist doctrine, dismissing it as nothing more than his taunting, punning joke at Claudius' expense. They also fail to connect Hamlet's deep concern of whether the Ghost comes from purgatory to Luther's repudiation of purgatory. “That Protestants disputed [the Catholic doctrine of purgatory] ... is

not dramatically relevant,” Jenkins declares.

From the very start, however, we see that Hamlet is torn between what he has studied at Wittenberg—classical and neo-classical humanist teachings, on one side, and questions concerning the Everlasting, the possibility of an afterlife, and God’s judgment, on the other. Yet editors make light of his deep philosophical and theological concerns, acknowledging them, at best, only very generally and incidentally. They ignore Hamlet’s two explicit mentions of philosophy, in which he criticizes Stoicism for its inability to understand the supernatural and philosophy in general for its inability to understand fortune. Philosophy, for Hamlet, is sorely limited to the rational.

Although Shakespeare takes pains to stress that Horatio is a Stoic, editors hide and even deny that he is. As one editor claims, when Hamlet refers to “your philosophy,” he is referring to “[n]ot some particular philosophy of Horatio’s but philosophy in general.” But unless one sees that Horatio is a Stoic, one would not recognize that nearly everything that Shakespeare has him say and do points up his adherence to Stoic doctrine—not only its equanimity, but its empiricism, skepticism, materialism, cosmopolitanism, rationalism, pantheism, and so on. It is true, as editors normally remark, that Horatio’s words and actions are often inconsistent. For example, he is a citizen of Denmark, yet is a stranger in the country; he is well aware of Danish history, but ignorant of

its traditions and customs; he has been back from Wittenberg for two months, but has not yet seen Hamlet; after an absence of hundreds of lines, he appears out of the blue when Hamlet summons him; he does not tell Hamlet of Ophelia’s madness, which he saw for himself; and so much more. “No audience is likely to notice [the inconsistencies],” one editor assures his readers. Such editors, unfamiliar with Stoicism, fail to recognize Shakespeare’s dramaturgical device—that Horatio’s various contradictions and incongruities are not simply personal, but illustrate fundamental contradictions and incongruities of Stoicism itself. What the editors criticize as Shakespeare’s artistic lapses are, on the contrary, signs of his philosophical understanding and great poetic skill.

Some editors, at a loss to understand, go so far as to reduce Horatio to a stock character or even to eliminate him as a real character at all. “Horatio is essentially a piece of the dramatic mechanism, a *Johannes fac totum* [Jack of all trades], who will say or do whatever the plot requires of him.” Such stunted editorial scope eviscerates not only the character Horatio but Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as a whole.

Not all of Shakespeare’s dramatic settings are straightforward or simple. Prospero’s island in *The Tempest* is famously unidentified in both time and place. And *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* appears to take place in Athens both at the time of its founding and at its Periclean peak, many centuries later. Both puzzling settings are essential to their

plays. *The Tempest's* uniquely unspecified setting undergirds the enchanted island's drama of the (im)possibility of a philosopher king, of the coincidence of wisdom and political rule. And *A Midsummer Night's Dream* connects Theseus' overthrow of patriarchal authority, on the one hand, and the Athenian love of the beautiful and the triumph of art, on the other. By connecting Athens' founding and flourishing, Shakespeare sets forth, in comical fashion, Pericles' proud boast in Thucydides that "We [Athenians] are lovers of the beautiful with thrift, and lovers of wisdom without softness" (trans. Rex Warner, revised).

Shakespeare also tacitly pairs the comic *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with the tragic *Timon of Athens*. In the same funeral oration in which Pericles celebrates their liberty and their noble loves, he cautions the Athenians that the pursuit of boundless empire and glory could corrupt them and destroy Athenian brilliance. Glory, resting on acquisition, tends to engender greed. Following Pericles' death, the Athenians did just what he had warned against. *Timon* depicts the effects. The Athenians' love of the beautiful is replaced by a voracious love of gold. Virtually everyone in *Timon* is chasing madly after money. Timon, the most honored man in the city, is extolled, even revered, for his wealth and profligate giving. In post-Periclean Athens, prodigality becomes esteemed as the highest nobility. Athens still has poets and painters, but they look upon their art as merchandise to be sold at a high price. And where *A*

Midsummer Night's Dream ends with all the women marrying, the only women in *Timon* are two whores who will "do anything for gold" and a masque of lascivious dancers, led by the character Cupid, entertaining a party of carousing men. Indeed, while Cupid promises that the showgirls' entertainment will be sensual, Timon's description of its pleasures is the play's only mention of anything as "beautiful." By setting the two plays in the same place at different times, Shakespeare forms a diptych which, taken together, shows readers the unfortunate inherent tendency of splendid Athens to decline and decay tragically into its ugly contrary.

Shakespeare's usual editors, prisoners of their own professional presuppositions, are typically and completely unaware of Shakespeare's remarkable depth and breath. Their scholarly prejudice impedes their own understanding. Rather than read Shakespeare in his own terms, they impose their own terms on him. Ironically, the editors seem not to recognize that their historicism applies not to Shakespeare, but to themselves. What they regard as their high scholarly standards are, in truth, nothing more than conventional opinions of our day.

Disclosure: *Jan Blits is the editor and annotator of rival editions of plays discussed here.*

Jan H. Blits is Professor Emeritus at the University of Delaware.
